

A Story of Parental Control of Marriages in England—From the Paston Family Letters

Agnes Paston tried for nine years, from 1449 to 1458, to arrange a marriage for her daughter Elizabeth, who ranged in age from twenty to nearly thirty during this period.¹ The first candidate that Agnes insisted on—in a long and woeful series, since Agnes was concerned with the financial arrangements, and not at all with her daughter’s preferences—was a fifty-year-old man named Stephen Scrope. Scrope had been married once before, sometime around 1420,² an unhappy union that had been forced on him for financial reasons³ by his step-father, Sir John Fastolfe, and he had an already-married daughter of approximately the same age as Elizabeth. Elizabeth resists this match to a man thirty years her senior, who describes himself as having suffered from a long illness “whereby I am disfigured in my persone and shall be whilest I lyve.”⁴ Agnes, however, wasn’t about to let her daughter’s revulsion at a disfigured old man get in the way of the business negotiations she had begun, especially over the matter of the money:

endentures mad be twen the knyght that hath his dowter and hym, whethir that Skrop, if he were married and fortunad to have children, if tho children schuld enheryte his lond, or his dowter, the whch is married.⁵

Elizabeth’s continued resistance to the match—far from leading to the mere threats that Shakespeare’s Capulet makes to Juliet, launches Agnes on a campaign of what we would now call torture. Elizabeth is made a virtual prisoner, and beaten on a regular basis. As her cousin Elizabeth Clere writes:

[S]che may not speke with no man, ho so ever come, ne not may se ne speke with my man, ne with servauntes of hir moderys but that sche bereth hire an hand otherwyse than she menyth. And sche hath sen Esterne the most part be betyn onys in the weke or twyes, and som tyme twyes on o day, and hir hed broken in to or thre places.⁶

It is not until some nine years later, however, that Elizabeth finally agrees—despite the abuse—to be married in 1458, at the age of twenty-nine, to a forty-year-old man named Robert Poynings (an adventurous man who had once fought with the rebels in the infamous Jack Cade uprising of 1450, and who would die in battle during the Yorkist rebellion of 1461 that eventually took down Henry VI). Even in the early days of her marriage, however, Elizabeth seems more to have given in to the relentless abuse than to have found anything like love. In a letter to her indomitable mother Agnes, Elizabeth’s tone seems weary, perhaps a touch sad:

[A]s for my mayster, my best beloved that ye call, and I must nedes call hym so now, for I fynde noon other cause, and as I trust to Jesu non shall; for he is full kynde unto me, and is as besy as he can to make me sur of my joyntor, wherto he is ibounde in a bonde of [£1000] to you mother, and to my brother John, and to my brother William, and to Edmund Clere, the which neded no such bond. Wherefore I beseke you, gode moder, as our most synguler trost is yn your gode moderhode, that my maistr, my best beloved, fayle not of the [100 marks] at the begynnyng of this terme, the which ye promysed hym to his mariage, with the remanent of the money of faders wille.⁷

¹ We can date her by a letter she wrote to her nephew John Paston III in 1485, letter 1003 from the edition by James Gairdner, *The Paston Letters*. 6 vols, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904); further references to letters will be marked P.L. and letter number from Gairdner.

² G. Poulett Scrope. *History of the Manor and Ancient Barony of Castle Combe, in the County of Wilts*. (London: J.B. Nichols & Son, 1852), 270.

³ “[T]he mariage of the said Stephen Scrope was solde to Sir William Gascoyng, the Chefe Justice of Englonde for [500] marke” (P.L. 97).

⁴ Scrope, 279.

⁵ P.L. 94.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ P.L. 374.

Poynings was good to her, and worked to make sure she would be financially secure, but the lines of Elizabeth's letter are permeated with an unmistakable air of loneliness and resignation. Her life, as Agnes had apparently wanted it to be, had become an ongoing business venture. In her will of May 18, 1487, Elizabeth left her daughter Mary a staggering treasure trove, evidently intending that no one would ever treat her daughter the way she had been treated all those decades ago.⁸ Her life had been bought and sold, and through the peculiar revenges of time, she had ended up, after a second marriage in her early forties, "the richest of the Paston family" upon her second husband's death.⁹ Business, if not love, had been good.

⁸ P.L. Wills, 6.

⁹ Percival Hunt. *Fifteenth Century England*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 133.